

Of Wool and Diesel is the first institutional solo exhibition in Canada by Rouzbeh Akhbari.

The exhibition is organized by Mercer Union, Toronto, and co-presented with the Toronto Biennial of Art.

**TORONTO
BIENNIAL
OF ART** Sept 26 –
Dec 20, 2026

Of Wool and Diesel is co-commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto; the Toronto Biennial of Art; HANGAR Centro de Investigação Artística, Lisbon; and the National Gallery of Canada's National Engagement Initiative.

Of Wool and Diesel is made possible with Leading Support from TD Bank Group and the Canada Council for the Arts.



With additional support from the Consulado-Geral de Portugal, Toronto, and the Camões-Portuguese Language Centre, Toronto.

Of Wool and Diesel is presented as part of *Artist First*, a Mercer Union commissioning platform. *Artist First* commissions are made possible with the generous support of Paul & Kaye Beeston, Rebecca Carbin, Sarah Heim, Vida Juozaitis in memory of Ric Evans, Bill and Sue Kidd, Christie Kirchner, Liza Mauer & Andrew Sheiner, Margaret McNee, Matt Meagher, David & Erica Neligan, Marina Shepaksov, Jad & Roula Shimaly, Lauren Charyk Silverberg, Carlos Yep, and Yue Yin. Learn more at mercerunion.org/artistfirst

TD Communications & Engagement Assistant is made possible with Leading Support from TD Bank Group.



Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art
1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada
(one block east of Lansdowne TTC Station)

Open Tuesday through Saturday, 11AM–6PM
office@mercerunion.org | mercerunion.org

Director & Curator: Theresa Wang
Curator & Head of Exhibitions: Aamna Muzaffar
Development & Operations Officer: Masaki Kondo
TD Communications & Engagement Assistant:
Miao Xuan Liu

Board of Directors: Femi Adeyinka, Sarah Heim, Christie Kirchner, Kahira Ngige, Philip Leonard Ocampo, Voke Odibo, Amanda Pajak, Marina Shepaksov, Emma Steen, Erica Stocking, Farnoosh Talaei, Yue Yin

Mercer Union acknowledges the support of its staff, volunteers and members, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council.



ISBN 978-1-926627-73-1



PUBLIC PROGRAMMING



Crossings: Kaleh Ziyarat
9 December 2026, 6:30 PM EDT

TIFF Lightbox
350 King St W, Toronto

In partnership with Mercer Union, TIFF Wavelengths Presents hosts the Toronto premiere of Rouzbeh Akhbari's debut feature, *Crossings: Kaleh Ziyarat* (2026). An experimental documentary filmed between the Caspian lowlands and the Strait of Hormuz, *Crossings* traces the undercurrents of sanctioned economies, revealing how informal trade and rumour sustain movement in a region increasingly defined by constraint. Through archival re-animation and documentary observation, the film follows the informal livestock trade that coils beneath the official infrastructures of the International North South Transport Corridor.

Tickets on sale in November at tiff.net

Image: Rouzbeh Akhbari, still from *Crossings: Kaleh Ziyarat*, 2026. Courtesy the artist.

To receive future publications by mail and many other benefits, become a supporter of Mercer Union. Cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.

**artistfirst
BIOGRAPHIES**

Rouzbeh Akhbari is an artist, filmmaker, and geographer working across exhibition and cinema contexts. His long-term research into the labour ecologies of border regions investigates forms of exchange that persist in response to infrastructures of control.

In 2024, Mercer Union invited the artist to develop a new film installation for his first institutional solo exhibition in Canada. Titled *Of Wool and Diesel* (2026), the work follows the smuggling of sheep by speedboat within the Strait of Hormuz and considers the act as part of an essential transcontinental supply chain, a network of informal trade, and a history of lawless seas with ties to 17th-century Portugal.

Of Wool and Diesel is the culmination of Rouzbeh's research and fieldwork over the last five years, developed alongside the artist's debut documentary feature, *Crossings: Kaleh Ziyarat* (2026), a counterpoint to the exhibition.

Mercer Union's collaboration with Rouzbeh emerges from our long-held commitment to commissioning new work, and creating milestone opportunities for artists to bring their visions to fruition in Toronto. Through our commissioning platform *Artist First*, we invest in the lifecycle of a project from conception to realization, cultivating discovery, risk-taking, and artistic development through long-term support and dialogue.

To learn more, visit mercerunion.org/artistfirst



Rouzbeh Akhbari is an artist, filmmaker, and geographer based in Toronto and Lisbon. Working across film and installation, his practice investigates the political and ecological entanglements of trade, infrastructure, and human geography. Akhbari's solo projects and collaborations with Felix Kalmenson as Pejvak, have been exhibited internationally at institutions such as Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai; M HKA Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp; and The Power Plant, Toronto. Festival presentations include FIDMarseille; Media City Film Festival; and Sao Paulo International Film Festival. Akhbari holds an MFA in Visual Studies from the University of Toronto and is a PhD candidate there in the Department of Geography and Planning.

Image: Rouzbeh Akhbari, *No Further Beyond*, 2024. Installation view: Jameel Arts Centre. Courtesy the artist.



**Rouzbeh Akhbari:
Of Wool and Diesel**

26 September 2026–23 January 2027

Straits and Tangles

by Johan Mathew

A strait is a chokepoint: the narrow, vulnerable waterway between the open ocean and a smaller sea. For millions of years, tectonic forces have slowly pinched the coastlines of Iran and the Arabian Peninsula together, almost turning the Gulf into a lake. Saltwater, fish, and oil tankers must thread between rocky shorelines and treacherous reefs to transit from the shallow waters of the Persian Gulf into the Indian Ocean. Squint, and the Gulf looks almost like a lung, feeding the global economy with petroleum instead of oxygen. From this perspective, the strait becomes a geological windpipe whose air supply can be cut off at any moment.

Rouzbeh Akhbari's exhibition, *Of Wool and Diesel*, draws our attention to the empires that have tried to place a chokehold on this waterway, and to the people and animals who slip through daily. Their crossings are a multi-species endeavor to sustain communities on both sides of the Gulf while greater powers try, as they have in the past, to keep commerce in their clutches. The visual, sonic, and tactile registers of Akhbari's works attend to the strait as a dissonant context where heavy surveillance and relative opacity coexist.

From the earliest civilizations of Mesopotamia to the latest iterations of American empire, the Strait of Hormuz has loomed large in global trade. But the first empire to truly capitalize on it was the Portuguese Estado da Índia, which sought to monopolize the spice trade between Europe and Asia in the 16th century. By squeezing the Strait of Hormuz, along with the Strait of Malacca to the east and the Bab-el-Mandeb to the southwest, Portugal hoped to rule the Indian Ocean.

This is where Akhbari's film, *Of Wool and Diesel* (2026) begins. Its haunting opening hints at the surprising durability of that imperial endeavor. Set on a rocky cliff at night, its prologue is anchored by a shepherd who performs an aria in *Sabir*, one of the Portuguese creole languages that developed to facilitate Indian Ocean trade. As she guides her flock, the shepherd watches for lamplights that mark the treacherous border between land and water, her song leading sheep and ships alike. Both the creole dialect and the coastal forts the Estado da Índia built along the littoral are traces of conquest. And while Portugal's empire was fleeting, its cultural and architectural influence was not.

The primary instrument of Portuguese efforts to monopolize the Strait of Hormuz was the spectacular violence of ship-mounted cannon, alongside

fortresses, lamps, and ultimately sheaves of paper as infrastructures of imperial rule. Admirals seeking to dominate trade instituted the *cartaz*—a pass certifying that a trader had paid appropriate tolls and honored the imperial monopoly. Within a century, the *cartaz* became a dead letter: Arab, Iranian, Indian, and African sailors found countless ways around both the tolls and the gunships. In 1622, merchants enlisted the Safavid Empire and the British East India Company to expel the Portuguese from their forts and drive their ships from the Gulf.



In the first act of Akhbari's film, we turn to the 19th century, when Britain became the empire whose fingers would clench around the Strait of Hormuz. Floating through what appears to be an imperial museum aboard a ship, we learn about the slow weakening of the Portuguese grasp on Hormuz with a subtle echo of Britain's own struggles to manage commerce. British laissez-faire policy branded some merchants smugglers and some sailors pirates; it expanded bureaucracies, bombed pirate vessels, and prosecuted slave traders, all in the name of free trade. In a subsequent act, we hear what would have been the reply to a love letter confiscated by the British in the region during the fallout of the Second World War. Penned by the wife of an Iranian sailor, the heartfelt dispatch lays bare not only the treacherous shoals he must navigate but also ambiguous juridical traditions and the obscurities between law on the books and the order maintained by foreign militaries. It speaks to how successful smugglers, both then and now, steer into legal loopholes, embracing bureaucracy to seize gains, often at great human cost.

The postcards that line the gallery walls depict these waters dotted with boats and centuries-old Portuguese forts. They reference 19th-century hydrographic drawings made aboard the HMS Mahi, a British gunship

that surveyed the coastline to aid navigation. The spare, delicate quality of these drawings reveals how little of the coastline could be seen from a vessel's deck. While such views from a gunship oriented imperial servants in the Persian Gulf, they also testify to how commerce and politics occurred out of view, in hidden coves and at times of day that could not be effectively surveilled. What might have traveled in the holds of those picturesque boats slipping out of view? Perhaps one might hear a sheep's bray floating above the crashing surf, or bales of wool muffling a conversation.

With the *namad*—or felt works—that visitors can experience underfoot, Akhbari brings us closer to the lives of smugglers, sailors, and sheep that move across these waters. The works materialize the film's latter acts, where speedboats rushing to shore unload sheep, evading maritime surveillance. On a clear day, one might glimpse the coast of Iran from an Omani mountainside. For communities on the shore, the strait is a watery bridge. Vessels drift from the Gulf of Oman to the Persian Gulf, but they also shuttle from Hormuz to Khasab. The strait not only constricts trade between the two seas, but it also links these two coasts. Whatever is attempting to squeeze traffic in one direction connects traffic moving perpendicularly. Sheep smuggled across the strait become the warp to the weft of oil tankers moving through.



The wool used to make these works reminds us that every day, a perfectly visible commerce forges a bond between Iran and its neighboring states. These felts come from sheep reared in the mountainous borderlands of Iran, Turkey, and the Caucasus, smuggled across the strait to Oman, where they are shorn before the animals are sold off to Gulf nations and their wool shipped back to Iran. The navigational light diagrams that form their various motifs connect artisans in Shahrekord with visitors in the gallery through the language of the seas that separate them.

The extraordinary yet also mundane crossings of sheep and wool across borders and coastlines emerge as essential to the livelihoods sustained by this precarious and formally illicit trade. These traffics take advantage of borders that expand markets and increase prices, and border bureaucracies that form a porous, pliable fabric. Smugglers have carried weapons and slaves across these waves, but more often they move innocuous goods. Customs officers don't want to squeeze traffic to a halt, so they make excuses and exceptions—and no one can question the innocent animals ferried back and forth. In these heathered felts, different cultures, artistic traditions, and economic incentives become twisted and matted together under the pressure of border regulations.

Today, the Strait of Hormuz is a mundane presence in newspapers across the globe. War, intermittent bombings, oil prices, and nuclear treaties spin out from the sudden centrality of this maritime channel for geopolitics. Both Iran and the United States have discovered—like Portugal and Britain before them—that it is almost impossible to choke off trade completely. Ships can be destroyed, but profitable commodities still slip through, even while diplomats meet in Switzerland and Cairo to sort out the grand political projects of aspiring hegemon.

So often reduced to a geo-strategic target, the Strait of Hormuz is in Akhbari's work a more vibrant world. Seen from the bottom up, this narrow strait is a seemingly infinite coastline of creeks and coves. Legal regulation is not simply imposed from above but must be negotiated with the thousands of boats and sailors who can always choose another place to come ashore. By opening our eyes and ears and pores to the perspective of those who move between its coasts, *Of Wool and Diesel* reveals this strategic chokepoint as an entangled mess of people, ships, and sheep.

Johan Mathew is an associate professor of history and director of the Global and Comparative History Masters Program at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. He is the author of *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism across the Arabian Sea* (University of California Press, 2016) as well as articles in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*; *History Workshop Journal*; and *Slavery and Abolition*. His newest book *Opiates of the Masses: The Addicted Lives of Human Capital* will be published soon with Princeton University Press.

Cover and interior images: Rouzbeh Akhbari, still from *Of Wool and Diesel*, 2026. Courtesy the artist.